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ABSTRACT

Schoolhouses have the potential to serve a larger constituency by providing social services such as day care, health care, adult education, senior citizen clubs, and recreation. The numbers of school-age children are declining, so using school space for community programs is being considered by many school districts. This issue reports on one community, Arlington, Virginia, that has extensive experience in the use of school space for other community purposes, and on two midwestern districts that converted vacant discount department stores into career education facilities. (Author/MLF)

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Schoolhouse

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Community programs occupy empty school spaces when pupil enrollments decline

Schoolhouses are being "deconsecrated" in many parts of the country from their singular role of educating children for 180 days a year. In an evolving and broader role, schoolhouses have the potential to serve a larger constituency by providing social services such as day care, health care, adult education, senior citizen clubs, and recreation. This quiet evolution gained momentum as a result of a recent social phenomenon—a slowdown in the U.S. birthrate is emptying schoolhouses.

It's becoming quite clear that most communities are extremely reluctant to close a school building even though it is markedly underused. But although the numbers of school-age children are declining, there is still a large adult population that needs services that could be housed in schools. Using school space for such services seems logical but it raises some complicated issues—legal, financial, programmatic, and administrative—that must be intelligently considered.

A current EFL research project will report on how districts can approach these issues in their attempts to redeploy excess school space for housing community programs. Our interest grew from two previous EFL reports, each on one of the two central aspects of the subject—*Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space* and *Community/School: Sharing the Space and the Action*.

By way of a preview, this issue of *Schoolhouse* reports on one community, Arlington, Virginia, that has extensive experience in the use of school space for other community purposes. We feel this experience may be of help to others in similar circumstances. For the same reason, we would like to hear from readers who know of a schoolhouse that has been or is being converted to community programs. Additional examples will make the upcoming report more comprehensive. Please use the enclosed postcard.

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Arlington schools offer wide variety of social services

Arlington County has gained national attention because it designs and builds new schools that also serve community needs (see the Thomas Jefferson Junior High School and Community Center in *Schoolhouse* No. 8). However, long before the Arlington School District began coopera-

tive construction projects with other municipal agencies it had started to hand over parts of (and even complete) school buildings to community agencies for their use. Today, the list of activities in Arlington's educational facilities reads like a complete directory of community services. Right now, in former school space, Arlington citizens can find: A museum; senior citizen centers; day care centers; pre-kindergarten programs; special education programs; drama workshops; recreation programs; community centers; alternative school programs; senior citizen lunches; public branch libraries; and teen centers. There are also education programs, including job training, basic education and high school equivalency; English as a second language; reading clinics; and extended day programs for children of working parents.

"We have few restrictions on how we use the space," says Joseph Ringers, the district's assistant superintendent for finance and business management. "Our concern is only that the uses do not conflict with the education program that may still exist in a school. In some cases we have turned part of our building over to other agencies—we share the facility with them. In others we've left the building entirely. We'll work out whatever arrangement seems to provide the best return to the community and to the taxpayers of the county."

The incorporation of community programs into schoolhouses has been achieved with little expenditure of funds for changing the facilities, and unfortunately the economizing shows. Senior citizens, for instance, do not have the warm hospitable amenities that a visitor would expect to find. Rooms for the programs have standard school furniture and lighting of two or three decades ago. However, criticism of the facilities is mitigated by the fact that the programs exist and that people are attending them in schoolhouses.

Arlington took its first step toward changing school spaces into other uses in 1958 when the district closed the Hume School, a small 75-year-old elementary school. Two years later Hume was acquired by the County Historical Society as a museum.

But the conversion of the Hume School was just an opening wedge. The real push came during the late 1960's as a result of growing community demand for services, combined with declining school enrollments and desegregation orders that shifted students and left some schools partly or completely empty. Today, 12 buildings have been reprogrammed fully or in part to non-school use, and one was restored to the tax roles when it was sold to private interests.

Principal saves her half-empty school by making it work for the community

One of the new programs was established in the Fairlington School built in 1944 to accommodate 440 pupils. Fairlington serves a somewhat isolated area of Arlington, and three years ago its student population declined to about 225. The school's existence was threatened because it could not be supported economically, and some people believed that pedagogically the school was too small to exist.

The principal, Ruth Kovacevich, recognizing the problem, moved to make the building so indispensable to the

community that the school board could not afford to close it. "She did it on her own, without telling the central administration," says Ringers, "but that's exactly the way it should have happened. We consider the principal to be the building director and we want her to find ways to make her building work better in the community."

Kovacevich began her campaign by inviting a local play school to move into "dedicated space" within the building. "The concept of dedicated space means that we reserve a space for a particular use," Ringers explains. Next she asked the recreation department to set up programs in the school, and offered to dedicate space for a senior citizens group. Later, a community theater and several other local organizations were reached and told that they, too, could have space dedicated to their use in their public school building.

Before long, a school built for more than 400 students was bulging at the seams, serving the needs of 225 youngsters in a public school, a preschool group, senior citizens and community organizations. Fairlington was no longer threatened with closing—instead there was talk of needing an addition!

Funds for support of the non-school uses of the building must come from non-school sources. In Arlington's case, the money is often provided by a community services fund (tax money, fees, gifts and grants), but where such funds do not exist, each of the user groups pays a share of the cost of running and maintaining the building.

In 1974, a nearby school needed extra space while it was being remodeled, and, since Fairlington was still open and operating, the district decided to reclaim classrooms for a year in order to house the extra students. "By squeezing the other organizations a little we were able to handle everybody although some spaces had to be shared," Ringers says. "But most important, we learned a lesson. Had we closed Fairlington entirely and sold or dismantled the building, we would have been in trouble when extra space was needed for an overflow elsewhere. By maintaining the building and making it a viable facility, we had it available when we needed it. School districts thinking of closing a school should keep that in mind before abandoning the building altogether."

New community center connected to existing school

Hoffman-Boston was a black high school before desegregation, housing about 700 students in grades 7 through 12. It first became a community facility in the more-or-less traditional manner—a community coordinator with office space in the building set up recreation and other programs after school hours. However, as the building was phased out as a full-time high school, a series of changes took place.

Today, about half of the school's capacity is used by 180 junior high school students (grades 7 through 9) who are in a district-wide alternative program. In addition, a Montessori school, run by the district but on a fee basis to parents, has preschool and kindergarten programs for 150 children. Adult education also operates in the building. Finally, a community center has been built on the site and connected to the school building. The center gives the community direct access to the school's gymnasium,

kitchen, cafeteria, auditorium and stage. "There is some question about the need for the new addition," Ringers admits. "While we might have housed the community program in dedicated space within the school, the community, through its leaders, demanded new and more appropriate space. It was provided with recreation department funds. A new playground, including tennis courts, was also included and now the school can use that community facility."

The principal in a building such as Hoffman-Boston plays a very different role from a traditional principal. In this particular case, Don Brandewie, who was principal of Hoffman-Boston through 1975, was appointed to the school because of his expertise at the junior high school level and his interest in the alternative approach to education. But as the building director he had to take leadership with reference to the other programs. "I have no background in preschool, kindergarten or Montessori," Brandewie admits. "The educational leadership of the programs has to come from within the faculty. I take administrative leadership in scheduling, budgeting, billing, getting supplies and equipment, seeing to it that everything is running properly, calling meetings, etc. I schedule all use of the school building—including community use. I work closely with the center director of course. When our students and teachers want to use the tennis courts or other community property, we must clear with him, so our cooperation and understanding of mutual needs are pretty important."

Two-thirds drop in enrollment, but the school bustles with diverse activities

Perhaps the most diverse community use of a school building is taking place at Drew Elementary. The building, which has had three additions since it was constructed in 1944, has a capacity of almost 1,100 students. About 400 youngsters are in the building, participating in the district's alternative elementary school program. Beyond that, the building houses:

A police aide program manned by out-of-uniform police aides. The program acts as a community ombuusman, a liaison between police and community and as a teen center, stressing safety, crime prevention, drug and alcohol abuse and other community-related programs.

A senior citizen center that includes a year-round lunch program. The lunches are prepared in the school district's central kitchen and delivered to Drew on the day they are to be served. Participants are requested to pay for their meals, but an envelope system protects the anonymity of those who are unable to pay. The senior citizen center serves as a meeting and recreation center five mornings a week, and school buses are used to transport the people. Group singing, sewing and health education programs and counselling are provided, but the center's greatest function is simply existing as a place where elderly people can meet, talk and be together.

A program designed to provide young adults with salable skills for the job market.

Adult education with emphasis on high school equivalency and basic education courses for people who did not complete their schooling.

A Montessori preschool program for about 100 children on a fee basis.

Kindergarten for the neighborhood.

A reading clinic established by the local Martin Luther King Community Center, which also uses school space for dances, tutoring, classes and meetings.

An extended day program from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. for school-age children of working parents, those who in other areas are known as "latch key" children.

Recreation programs including basketball, tennis, pool, and other indoor games.

Summer free lunch program for school-age youngsters, sponsored, with federal support, by a black sorority, LINKS, in Arlington.

The school building-community center is open seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. until at least 10 p.m. and serves residents from 1½ years of age to 92. All programs within the building are under the ultimate control of the school principal, but the recreation department provides a director who assists with scheduling and runs the evening activities.

"One of the difficulties in running a school like this," says principal Ray O'Neill, "is that people tend to move in and out of assigned areas, sometimes for legitimate purposes, sometimes not. It takes a lot of organization and a lot of getting used to, but nevertheless, the program does work. During the school year we try to keep the classroom area free for student use, but we don't prevent senior citizens taking a shortcut through the students' entrance. As a matter of fact, some senior citizens are helping with the school programs—reading to children or listening to them read, for example. One retired man is a skilled pool player and he takes a group of four children to the poolroom every day and teaches them the game. Other seniors have helped children with sewing and knitting. We encourage as much of that interaction as possible.

"But I don't want to minimize the problems. People who have no legitimate business in the building sometimes cause problems. In my first months here I didn't always know who belonged and who didn't, and we lost some valuable equipment. Open school buildings have to put up with the problems of openness.

"I've been asked if I'd rather have an elementary school without the community using the building. It might be an easier job, but I think this is a far more rewarding one. The community should be using school buildings, and fortunately we are able to find many ways to serve the needs of our community in this building."

Adults learn skills in school no longer needed for children

The Wilson School, constructed in 1910, is a small building located on a main artery in a commercial part of the county. When it was no longer needed for school use it was developed as a center for teaching employment skills and English to the large number of non-English speaking adults who settle in the area. At present, a senior citizens center is being instituted. Since the skills and language programs are educational, the building remains under the control of the school district and is run by the adult education supervisor.

Three agencies share program costs

Langston-Brown was a small (330 capacity) elementary school built originally in 1925, with four additions in later years. The school became excess as a result of desegregation. The only school district program still taking place in it is adult education, aimed primarily at overage dropouts and push-outs from the district's high schools. The program provides students in their late teens and early 20's with basic education and job training.

Apart from this adult education, the building functions as a community center housing a large Arlington Community Action Program that includes a day care center for preschoolers with a sliding fee schedule, a police aide program, and a recreation component that includes a senior citizens center. However, because adult education comes under the aegis of the school district, the person in charge of adult education is automatically the building director. "It is, after all, a school building and he is the school district representative here," says Ringers. Costs for running the building and maintaining it are split three ways among the school district, the recreation department and the Arlington Community Action Program.

County recreation department takes over empty schools

The Lee School, built in 1926 for 165 students, represents a different approach. When the board of education had no further use for the school it was turned over to the County Recreation Department which appointed a director and established programs. The building now accommodates a senior citizens center, a co-op nursery (paid for by fees), and a far-flung recreation program aimed at all age groups. The building is totally under the direction of the recreation department, which pays the school district to provide maintenance services.

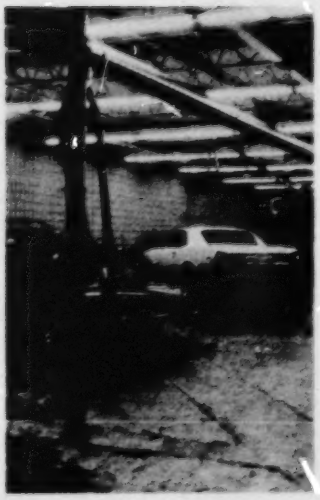
Similarly, the small Stewart School with outstanding park-like grounds is now under the direct control of the recreation department. The building houses a theater/performing arts community program that draws from all over the county. The seven former classrooms are used for prop storage, costume and rehearsal rooms. However, because there was a community demand for adult evening education programs, the school district now borrows space from the recreation department in the former school.

"There is no particular script as to how we handle these things," says Ringers. "If we feel we can usefully run programs in a building, we maintain control and invite community groups to come in and use the available space.

"If the school district feels that it cannot run any programs in the building, we make the facility available to the county and to other public agencies. If they can use it, then the necessary arrangements are made.

"Of course, some buildings don't lend themselves to any further use. In one case the building was demolished and the grounds used for other purposes. In another, we sold the building and land for a substantial sum, and the new owner is paying taxes on the property. But the key in all cases is to gain or maintain community values. Schools, after all, are more than educational institutions. They are community property and we in the school district must take the lead in finding ways in which our buildings can best serve their communities."

And on the other hand, there are big bargains in department stores for districts with a need for space



While some school districts across the nation are wondering what to do with their vacant space, others are still wrestling with the need to provide more space than they have available.

Two midwestern districts facing this problem have solved it in a similar way—by converting vacant discount department stores into superior career education facilities.

The two—Raytown, Mo. and Davenport, Iowa—had many things in common. Both wanted to respond to demands for more career education programs, and had to do so within limited budgets. Each found an available open-space building, airconditioned, sprinklered and situated near good transportation. Each purchased and remodeled the building for far less than the cost of providing the same facilities in a new structure.

In Davenport, Keith Mattke, the district's director of vocational education, learned about the availability of a 77,000-sq-ft building, centrally located within the district. "We found a pretty dirty building with sagging doors, leaking roof and broken windows," Mattke recalls, "but our architects told us the building was structurally sound and that the price was certainly right—$875,000 for the building and 11 acres in a prime commercial district."

Davenport acquired its building in June, 1973, and had it in full use in January, 1975. The school building contains a machine shop, a large welding shop, and five auto service areas. In the "light" industry area, there are three electromechanical rooms, a huge model office, a health services suite, a child care learning center, a vocational printing shop and two unassigned spaces, one of which will be turned into a special education diagnostic and career development center.

The building also houses the administrative headquarters for the district's vocational program, media center, and a bus repair shop.

Total cost of the project—including purchase, remodeling, equipment and fees—was under $2 million. Eleven acres of prime land remain available for future expansion. According to Mattke, equivalent space would have cost at least $3 million.

In Raytown, a suburb of Kansas City, Mo., Don Sheets, director of the Joe Herndon Area Vocational School, who has had previous experience with remodeling buildings for school use said, "Industrial buildings can be converted quickly, easily and inexpensively. On the other hand, converting former elementary or secondary schools into vocational centers just doesn't work. There are too many restrictions and the cost is too great."

Raytown acquired its 90,000-sq-ft building and an 11-acre parking lot for $825,000 in November, 1973. The building was ready for occupancy the following September.

To make the Raytown building usable as a school, new toilets had to be installed, plumbing completely redone, and new power lines brought into the building.

For the most part the floors were sound and the lighting adequate. Only in the space set aside for cosmetology were major changes made, with incandescent lighting and carpeting. Overhead doors were cut into the side of

the building to accommodate the automobile repair shops.

About 45,000 sq ft of the building were remodeled and put into use, leaving an equal area available for further expansion. Housed in the converted area at present are cosmetology; an airconditioning, refrigeration and heating lab; auto mechanics; building trades orientation programs (students built a house inside the building); marine, motorcycle and small engine repair programs; radio and TV repair studios; and a welding shop.

It cost the district $380,000 to remodel the part of the building that is currently in use. Sheets says that the most expensive work has already been done so that it will cost even less to convert the rest of the building when it is needed. "We put up a comparable building at just about the same time for $35 a sq ft. This building cost us about $18 a sq ft and it is at least as good as the one built from scratch."

For more information, contact Keith Mattke, Director of Vocational Education, Davenport Public Schools, Davenport, Iowa 52806, and Don Sheets, Director, The Joe Herndon Area Vocational Technical School, Raytown, Mo. 64138.

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